DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 824 CS 006 679

AUTHOR Noble, Cynthia
TITLE What's Happening down the Midway: An Assessment of Massachusetts Middle School Reading Programs.
PUB DATE Apr 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Reading Association (13th, Boxborough, MA, April 1-2, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Area Reading; Elementary Secondary Education; Informal Assessment; *Instructional Improvement; *Middle Schools; Program Evaluation; Program Improvement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; *Reading Research; Reading Skills; Reading Teachers; Remedial Reading; Student Characteristics; *Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS Massachusetts

ABSTRACT

To accumulate the data necessary for making recommendations for the improvement of middle school reading programs in Massachusetts, such programs were assessed by computer searches, informal interviews, and random questionnaires. "TRANS," Teaching Reading Acquisition Natural to Subject Areas, embodies the kind of program needed to meet the needs of the "transescent" (early adolescent). Such a program should include developmental, accelerated, and remedial reading instruction. The survey often found isolated skills instruction, although content area reading was needed. Accelerated instruction was an infrequent educational objective, developmental reading instruction was most common, while remedial instruction also took place at most of the middle schools assessed. The reading laboratory was the most common setting for all three types of instruction. Recommendations for improving programs and increasing their support include (1) remembering the characteristics of transescents, (2) tapping both reading specialists and subject area educators, (3) promoting a wide range of materials, (4) providing for a variety of learning/teaching modalities, (5) focusing on student and teacher interests, and (6) building a positive attitude toward Massachusetts middle school reading programs. (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED221824

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

What's Happening Down the Midway

An Assessment of Massachusetts Middle School Reading Programs

Sister Cynthia Noble*

Introduction

The place of reading instruction in the middle school curriculum is not very well established in Massachusetts. Reading is taught as a separate subject in some schools, as individualized instruction in others, while it is also theorectically taught in all content areas, and so it goes on. There is a clear consensus among reading educators on the importance of reading in the middle school, but that consensus does not extend to a particular plan or program. The purpose of this partial report on the results of independent research concerned with an assessment of middle school reading programs in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is threefold: (1) to update present theories concerned with the philosophy of middle school reading programs, (2) to become knowledgeable about various programs and techniques presently existing in Massachusetts, (3) to make recommendations for improving middle school reading programs so that efforts can be supported to think through reading and how it can best be integrated into a middle school curriculum.

Background

The term "midway" from the title of the report connotes the idea of

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sister Cynthia Noble
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS006679

halfway and also a place for "side shows" and other amusements at any fair or the like. As far as the idea of a "side show" is concerned you as the reader can evaluate this idea in connection with Proposition 2½ and its effect on the educational environment in Massachusetts. It's a three-ring circus right now!

This assessment of Massachusetts middle school reading programs has been and continues to be in process while Proposition 2½ has played havoc with established reading programs. Basically, most of the information being presented in this report is fairly-well stabilized but, as is characteristic of early adolescents attending the middle school level, the reading programs are in a constant state of flux especially with the impact of Proposition 2½.

The process utilized for gathering data in order to better understand Massachusetts middle school reading programs included computer searches dealing with the concepts of the philosophy of middle schools, concepts about middle school reading programs, and characteristics of the early adolescent student. Informal interviews were conducted and questionnaires were distributed randomly, in addition to survey techniques, observations and onsite visitations.

What really spurred this research/survey was the November, 1980 publication, Report of the Study Committee on Middle School/Junior High School Education to the Massachusetts Board of Education. From this

committee, two sub-committees were formed (1) one to survey current practices in the state, and (2) another to review research on early adolescents. The Committee agreed on a working definition of the early adolescent:

> "The early adolescent period encompasses young people between the ages of 10 to 15 and grades 5 to 9. It is a period in which physical and psychological changes are occurring. There are changes in the body formation, the development of reproductive maturity and secondary sex characteristics, and cognitive development. It is a transitional state between childhood and age 16."
>
> Middle School/Junior High School Education, 1980

This working definition appears to be all-inclusive of the characteristics of students at the early adolescent stage of development.

Some of the basic assumptions regarding the status of middle schools in Massachusetts arrived at by the Committee, include the fact that the current practices of many traditional schools serving early adolescents seem to be at odds with the developmental characteristics of students at this age. The Report also assumes that there is tremendous variability on all developmental parameters of early adolescents. Given this variability, placing students in particular grades by age may not be appropriate, and tracking, which may lock students into differential ability levels may reflect the rate of developmental rather than intellectual capability. Lastly,

the changes experienced by students at the state of early adolescence can be both unsettling and confusing.

Statistically speaking, Massachusetts middle school students average roughly between 85,000 to 90,000 at each of these grade levels (5 to 9) with an approximate total population of 450,000 students. There are approximately 170 middle schools in Massachusetts with varying grade configurations of 5-9, 5-8, 7-8, with the most common grouping being 6-8.

Generally Speaking...The Transescent

A term that has recently originated in relation to students belonging to the early adolescent stage is transescent. This term is extremely appropos when considering the state of transition that he/she is experiencing. The transescent is an emerging adolescent groping with identity problems in the process of attempting to develop with a value system. Also, the transescent is coming to terms with his/her own body, gaining emotional independence from authority and also beginning to explore vocational opportunities and alternatives.

In organizing an educational program for the transescent it is necessary to give consideration to the total transescent. An approach devised by the author to help keep in mind that the total development of the transescent takes priority, is the "P.I.E.S." approach, that is the, physical, intellectual, emotional and social aspects of development. The period of transescence

is exceptionally unique in that the early adolescent student is struggling to put all of the pieces together in his/her life; in other words, trying to get his/her act together.

Specifically Speaking...A Middle School Reading Program

Acrostically, "TRANS" is utilized here to determine the type of reading program that should be characteristic of a middle school: Teaching Reading Acquisition Natural to Subject Areas. Herber (1978) and other middle school reading educators have emphasized that middle school reading is a two-way system; learning to read and reading to learn. In other words, reading is a process leading to a product (mastery of subject content).

It is the contention of reading professionals specializing in middle school reading that reading education should develop the capacity for analytic thought. They also point out the importance of identifying programs that will facilitate the transition to formal or analytic thought. There needs to be the assurance that options for some students remain open for entry into higher instructional levels. It is especially vital that consistency and coherency be developed in human relationships, also. Middle schools have to encourage transescents to become independent, effective readers. Maturing reading behaviors should invariably affect the following areas in the middle school curriculum: knowledge, skills attitudes, application, interests, and habits.

A totally and well-developed school reading program should follow the descriptions and definitions indicated by Otto, Smith, and Hansen (1978). Types of possible reading instruction described include:

(a) accelerated instruction: The purpose of this type of instruction is enrichment. It is aimed at students who are on grade level or above. Accelerated reading usually occurs in the form of an elective class in speed reading or vocabulary development.

(b) developmental reading instruction: the continuation and development of literacy skills for students who are progressing at a normal rate. Very often this type of instruction takes the form of mandatory reading classes at the middle school level. It is supposedly an extension of the student's elementary reading experiences.

(c) remedial reading instruction: intensive reading assistance for disabled readers. This type of instruction usually occurs when students are reading two or more years below grade level.

These types of reading instruction at the middle school level usually occur in the following designated reading settings: the reading laboratory, the reading clinic, reading classes and content area classes. Thorough familiarity with the needs of students in a particular school is required before appropriate reading instruction can be defined for that school.

Assessment

The assessment of Massachusetts middle school reading programs is a partial report which provides the results of the research/survey on randomly selected middle schools throughout the Commonwealth. It is important at this point to indicate that several junior high schools throughout Massachusetts are presently in the process of being replaced by middle schools. This transformation process involves several factors for the implementation of a middle school: (a) system-wide coordination of educational objectives, (b) involvement of faculty and staff in the planning stages, (c) preliminary planning for the developmental needs of the students, and (d) opportunities for parent input prior to the finalization of plans. In addition to these preliminary proceedings, other factors are given consideration in the process: (a) curriculum additions are required with adaptive educational organization, (b) the transescent deserves "special attention", (c) faculty teams must agree on the structure and the process, and (d) faculty needs time to meet and assess.

Since several middle schools are now replacing established junior high schools in Massachusetts, it is important that the transformation process considers the whys and ways for the reorganization procedures. These developments necessitated the rationale for a partial report on middle school reading programs. The most significant consideration which has evolved through this complex process is the fact that middle school program development is

succeeding because administrators, faculty members, students and parents are working together to construct a meaningful program while allowing time for piloting, incorporating evaluation, and attending to the real needs of the students involved, the transescents themselves.

There are two questions that were focused upon during the assessment of the middle school reading programs:

(1) What type of actual reading instruction is going on? and,

(2) Are the reading materials and setting appropriate for the readers?

In reality, the ideal reading situation is to have a connected text as the major activity in reading classes. Very often the focus of reading instruction is isolated skills instruction, whereas reading needs to be learned in a meaningful context.

The lack of reading in content areas is often related to (1) a teacher's compensating for a student's inability to read, or (2) teachers assuming their students are reading widely in other classes. Teachers interviewed for the assessment stated that in the first instance they tried to teach around their assigned text by using films, filmstrips, and lectures - anything to protect less able students from frustrating situations.

A second factor related by middle school subject-content area teachers (especially mathematics and science) is the assumption that students were

reading in English and reading classes. A cursory glance at middle school English curriculum would dispel this belief. Many middle school English teachers teach units corresponding to grading periods, for example, grammar for one quarter, composition for another. An apparent weakness inherent in this approach is the lack of opportunity for middle school student's extended reading of text during periods when literature is not being taught.

Observations of the amount and appropriateness of reading instruction going on in separate reading and content area classes at Massachusetts middle schools were followed by an inquiry procedure to determine if the reading programs fit particular schools. This was determined by establishing the types of reading instruction occurring and the settings for the instruction. Descriptions and definitions were categorized according to accelerated instruction, developmental instruction and remedial instruction (Otto, Smith and Hansen, 1978).

At the middle school level in Massachusetts, accelerated instruction does not occur too frequently as an educational objective of the reading program. In most cases, accelerated instruction is considered to be a part of the developmental program in the form of speed reading.

Developmental instruction occurs more frequently than the other types of reading education in the form of study skill classes, primarily. In most of the middle schools assessed it is a mandatory course, while at others it is an elective course. The settings in which devleopmental instruction takes place are in the form of regularly established reading classes, reading/learn

ing centers, reading laboratories, content-area classes and also in co-ordination with the English department. Grouping procedures vary from heterogeneous to homogeneous to smaller individualized arrangements. In some schools the developmental program in integrated with the development of writing skills, There are developmental reading programs in other middle schools for students who do not elect a foreign language. Direct reading instruction is also provided in content area classrooms in which the subject teachers teach reading skills specific to their subject. There is definitely a potpourri of programs, practices, procedures and philosophies being presented in middle schools in connection with developmental reading instruction.

Invariably, remedial instruction is taking place at most of the middle schools assessed. Title I classes esixt in several of the schools. Small-group instruction, cross-age tutoring and corrective grouping procedures have also been established to assist disabled readers. Some of the common settings for remedial instruction include reading clinics, reading laboratories, language-learning-reading-speech centers, and English-Reading Workshop centers.

The reading laboratory is a very common setting utilized in the middle schools. Accelerated, developmental and remedial instruction all happen in this setting.

The assessment clearly indicates that reading instruction at the middle school level in Massachusetts serves a variety of functions. The results of

the assessment strongly direct attention to the fact that consistency, coordination, collaboration and cohesiveness need to be developed in order to strengthen and firmly establish a meaningful middle school reading program in Massachusetts middle schools.

Reading Recommendations

"TRANS", a prefix meaning across, also defines the relevant role of middle school reading educators as "Bridge-builders" across the "suspension bridge" (middle school) between the elementary and secondary levels. How can professional educators justify the reason that reading instruction should be terminated at the end of grade six? Educational evidence points out very clearly that reading basically needs to continue as a "required subject" for the middle and secondary schools. Reading is not a subject but a lifetime process that needs to be integrated into the middle school program - TEACHING READING ACQUISITION NATURAL TO SUBJECT AREAS.

In suggesting reading recommendations, it is essential to recognize the values of local school districts in addition to their autonomy and control. Therefore, the majority of the reading recommendations will be in the nature of guidelines with one exception.

There should be a very strong movement established in order to promote and encourage mandated reading instruction (K-12) as a curriculum area. This would require the establishment of a movement towards legislation in affiliation with other professional educational organizations throughout the state. We are all well aware that there is a heavy emphasis on the mastering

of basic skills (reading, writing, math, speaking, listening) within the state right now. Education is a process and reading is a vital aspect of this process. Is there really a need to keep questioning whether or not reading belongs in the curriculum? Why not settle this issue once and for all through legislation?

The primary goal of a comprehensive middle school reading program should be the development of a concentric curriculum; that is, a curriculum designed to present important concepts, skills, topic, etc. for study in reading instruction.

In either the initial stages or the expansion of a middle school reading program there are particular procedures to which one should necessarily adhere. One needs to gather a core group of interested staff members in forming a Reading Committee at the middle school level. The Reading Committee should be representative of all the middle school departments. A Reading Committee chairperson should be elected from among the members of the Committee. It is important that the Committee elicit administrative reaction and support, also. The Committee needs to identify middle school reading program objectives. Following the above preliminary steps, is the task of determining the initial status of the reading program through assessment and evaluation: (a) survey staff interest and background, (b) do student survey testing, (c) determine what facilities and materials are available, (d) propose what type of a budget will be needed to implement the middle school reading program, and (e) make

recommendations for additional reading personnel that will be required to implement the program.

Further factors for developing a middle school reading program are:

- a determination of essential reading skills to be taught to students in a sequential manner,
- provision made for reading in the content areas,
- the reading program should be congruent with the varying educational needs of a school district's students (abilities, attitudes, interests, cultural diversities, etc.),
- the reading program should be developed and organized in a manner designed to promote continual as well as optimal achievement in reading,
- the reading program should provide instruction which is learner-oriented in philosophy and practice,
- parents and community members should support the middle school reading program,
- the system's reading program should be regularly assessed informally and formally bu intraschool personnel as well as by outside professional consultants.

Middle school reading personnel should devise a joint action plan with other personnel and parental/community support in working with the student in transescence. Members of the reading department should function in the following capacities:

- provide inservice workshop sessions,
- assist in the development of lesson plans and units,
- participate in budget preparation, textbook selection, and supplementary material selection,

- encourage curriculum development,
- act in a consulting role to other faculty members,
- emphasize the importance of personnel at the middle school level acting as "bridge-builders" through team-teaching and inter-disciplinary departmentalization efforts,
- enhance the "specialty" approach for subject-content teachers by correlating reading skill development specific to their subject area.

The prime consideration underlying each of these reading recommendations should be an emphasis on the interaction of learning to read and reading to learn.

In summarizing, the essential principles necessary for planning and implementing a meaningful middle school reading curriculum are: constantly remembering the characteristics of transescents, tapping both reading specialists and all subject-content educators, promoting a wide range of materials, providing for a variety of learning/teaching modalities, focusing on the student and teacher interests, and most importantly, building a positive attitude toward Massachusetts middle school reading programs.

---

*Many sincere thanks to the Massachusetts Reading Association for awarding me the 1981-1982 Sylvia D. Brown Memorial Scholarship. It is my deepest hope that the Middle School Assessment will encourage and promote positive action toward the strengthening and establishment of reading programs as part of the core curriculum at the middle school level. I personally believe that it is only through legislation that this can be achieved.

Sources for Middle School Reading Programs

New England League of Middle Schools, Inc.
c/o Dr. James P. Garvin
Director of Middle School/Secondary Education
Gordon College
Wenham, MA 01984

Middle School Reading Special Interest Group/I.R.A.
c/o Mr. Gerald J. Kochinski
5624 Broad Street
Library, PA 15129

The Center for Early Adolescence
Car Mill Mall - Suite 223
Carrboro, NC 27510

National Middle School Association
Box 968
Fairborn, OH 45324

Middle Grade Educators Associates
Gordon College
Wenham, MA 01984

The Middle School Resource Center
c/o Mr. Robert Malinka
Indianapolis, IN

Programs and Organization for Middle Schools
A Supplement to the Report of the Study Committee on Middle School/Junior High School Education
Edited by: The Massachusetts Dissemination Project
31 St. James Avenue, Room 614
Boston, MA 02116

Bibliography

Allington, R.L., "Improving Content Area Reading Instruction in the Middle School." Journal of Reading 18 (1975): 455-461.

Aulls, M.W., Developmental and Remedial Reading in the Middle Grades. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978.

Burmeister, L.E. Reading Strategies for Middle and Secondary School Teachers, 2nd ed. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Welsey, 1978.

Duffy, G.G. (ed.) Reading in the Middle School. Newark, Del.: International Reading Association (Perspectives in Reading, No. 18), 1974.

Hafner, L.E., (ed.) Improving Reading in Middle and Secondary Schools - Selected Readings, 2nd. ed. New York: MacMillan, 1974.

Herber, H.G., Teaching Reading in Content Areas, 2nd. ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978.

Otto, Wayne,; Smith, Richard; and Hansen, Lee. The School Reading Program. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978.

Pearson, P.D. and Johnson, D.D., Teaching Reading Comprehension New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.

Robinson, H.A., Teaching Reading and Study Strategies - the Content Areas. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1975.

Smith, R.J. and Barrett, T.C., Teaching Reading in the Middle Grades, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1974.

Dissemination Services on the Middle Grades, c/o Educational Leadership Institute, Inc., Box 863, Springfield, Mass. 01101

Report of the Study Committee on Middle School/Junior High School Education to the Massachusetts Board of Education. November, 1980.